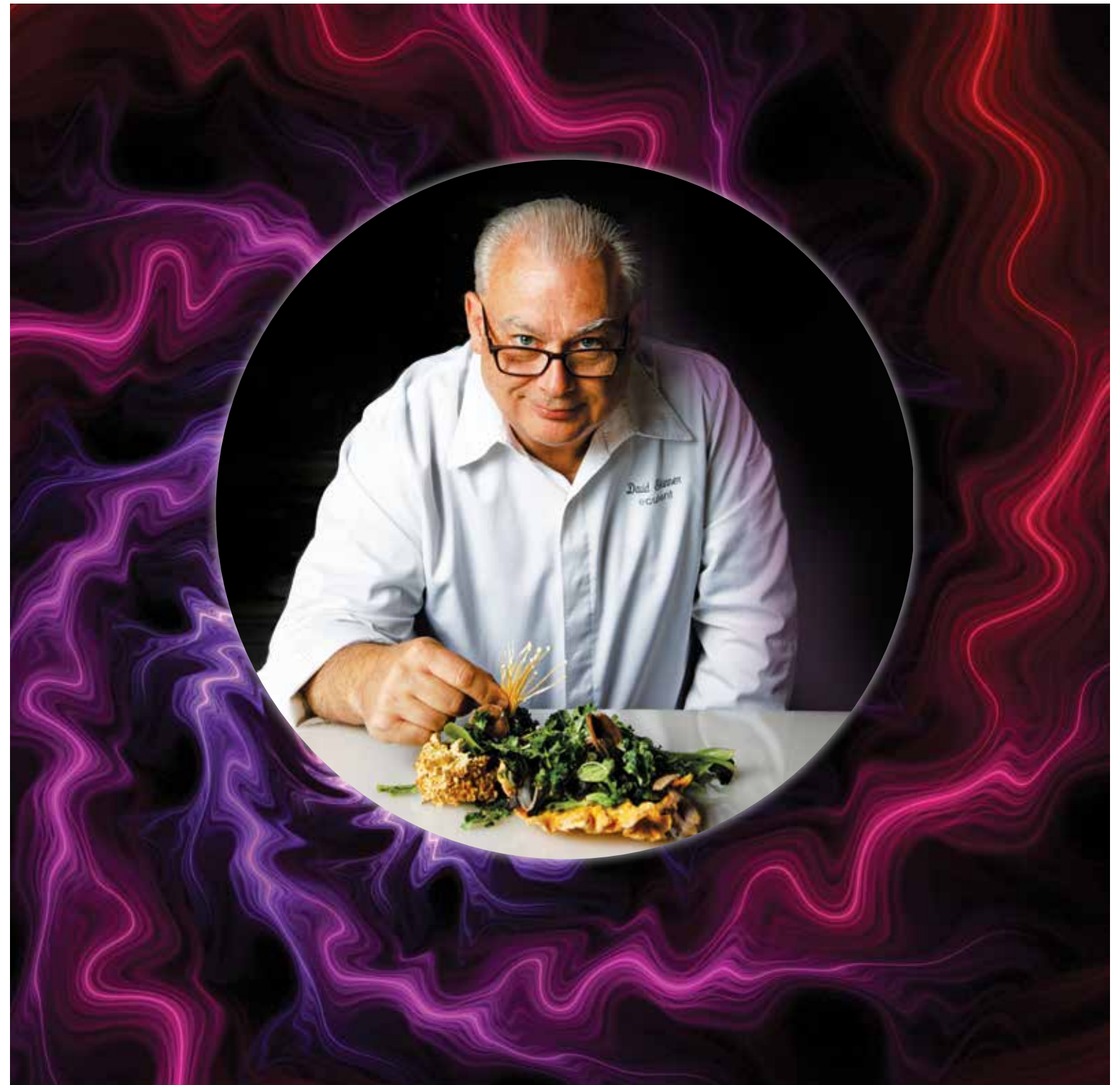


The Willy Wonka of Texas

Meet the chef who's creating culinary magic near Houston

David Skinner gestured to a 2-foot-tall ceramic tree in his restaurant's laboratory and smiled slyly. "Everyone can pluck one of those green leaves," he said. "Pop it in your mouth and tell me what you taste." I reached for one. What initially felt like a paper-thin potato chip on the tongue melted into the flavors of a Caesar salad—garlic, Parmesan, a hint of anchovy, and romaine. Then Skinner pointed to an arrangement of cream-color orbs the size of jawbreakers. Eat one whole, he told us. So I popped one in my mouth. The smooth, almost wax-like shell dissolved into a bite of—incredibly—French onion soup.



By June Naylor 📍 Photographs by Kimberly Davis

If all this sounds like a scene out of *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, that's because it *felt* like one, too. Food writers who've visited Eculent, Skinner's 6-year-old restaurant just outside Houston, have called him a modern-day Willy Wonka—a chef who blends classic cuisine with the whimsy and magic associated with molecular gastronomy. Foodies come from across Texas and the globe to experience the restaurant. A foursome from New Jersey had recently flown in just for dinner. Another family makes an annual pilgrimage from Thailand. Not surprisingly, just getting a table takes patience: The waiting list is even longer, I've heard, than the wait at Denmark's Noma, one of the world's most celebrated restaurants.

I'd been wanting to try Eculent for a long time. I never sampled the molecular gastronomy of El Bulli, Ferran Adrià's legendary and now-shuttered restaurant near Barcelona, Spain. I'd always regretted that. So when I finally got the chance to try Skinner's restaurant (mere weeks before the pandemic turned the world upside down), I jumped.

Eculent is located in Kemah just a few blocks from the Boardwalk's Ferris wheel and thrill rides. The simple, midcentury cottage facade belies the sophisticated operation inside. When my husband and I showed up for dinner with 16 others, Skinner introduced himself as the evening's host. Distinguished in his starched white chef jacket, with a head of sleek, silvering hair and elegant reading glasses on the bridge of his nose, the soft-spoken middle-aged gent soon announced our first hands-on activity. "You'll be making your first course," he said. "You cooks know what a mirepoix is? You'll make this with carrot, celery, and onion micro-herbs." He pointed to a flat of tiny wisps of herbs: "Clip these and add some edible dirt to your bowl."

Several giggles and gasps went up, but everyone seemed game. The soil, it turned out, was a savory combination of crumbled, dehydrated beets, pistachios, and black olives. We mixed this into our own miniature French presses containing a splash of warm miso, and voilà—in only a minute or two, we'd made a fresh vegetable consommé with bright, light garden flavors.

Skinner then led all of us down the cottage's front steps, past his flower and vegetable gardens, through



a hidden door in a fence, and into a futuristic food laboratory. Jars and small bins filled with dried ingredients lined one wall and 3-D printers lined another. One of the printers uses slurries to make edible objects, he explained. Another turns out chocolate creations, and a third produces items like the ceramic and plastic plateware used in his dining room. Skinner pointed to a freeze-dryer not unlike those used by food makers down the road at NASA. In fact, he said, astronauts are some of Eculent's biggest fans.

After our eye-opening lab tour, we returned to the restaurant and got down to eating. Six of us perched on plush, upholstered stools at the bar, while the rest filled four-tops along a banquette in an adjacent intimate dining room. Beside my husband, Marshall, and me were a young couple from Houston and a fortysomething mom and dad from nearby Pearland enjoying date night. Everyone seemed giddy—all reveling in the mystery before us.

Skinner began this chapter of the service with his version of a picnic. A "campfire" featured a giant fluff of cotton candy flavored with 17 different spices imparting a smoky aroma and taste, paired with a flute of Moscato from Skinner's on-site winery. The effect was brilliant: The slightly sweet bubbles played off the spicy campfire bites. Next, "uninvited guests" turned out to be two tiny Amazon ants—yes, real, dried ants—nestled into compressed pineapple cubes coated in rose crystals. A citrusy flavor proved a foil



for the fruit's sweetness and rose's perfume. Then came Skinner's unique take on a BLT: a dark-red sphere crowned with what appeared to be crumbs. A one-bite course, chewed slowly, revealed all the delicious flavors: toasted bread, smoky bacon, clean lettuce, and fresh, juicy tomato. Upon devouring it, we and our bar-mates, in unison, let out sighs of delighted pleasure. "This one took us three weeks to perfect," Skinner said, nodding in a way that suggested he was pleased with the outcome.

Soon, the overhead lights changed, painting the room emerald green. Skinner announced a romp in the forest. Chef de cuisine Stacey Mullen presented a large ceramic dish covered by a giant glass dome that trapped smoke inside. She lifted off the glass and a hickory scent spilled forth in a wispy cloud that disappeared to reveal a mound of freeze-dried lettuces and seven kinds of wild mushrooms, all topped with tender escargots. Using stainless steel forks that somehow bore a forest floor aroma, we dug through the greens and fungi to find edible soils made from dehydrated black truffles, beets, black olives, and pistachios. Following the instructions, I mixed all the



Clockwise from far left: Appetizers rest on branches of tabletop trees; a creamy soup incorporates fried, roasted, and dried cauliflower, as well as *mimolette*, a hearty French cheese; the author shares a special cocktail with her husband; ants arrive in compressed pineapple cubes.



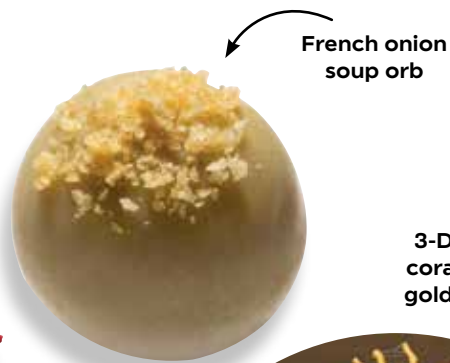
components together and stabbed the perfect forkful, dipping it into a dish of red wine-laced butter. What can I say? I swooned.

Apparently, my audible reactions to such plates typified the response of most diners. "Guests come in a little vulnerable—it's fear of the unknown," said Mullen, who has a couple of interns helping her in the kitchen. "But David has a way of putting everyone at ease immediately, so they loosen up and have fun." If the well-rehearsed team seemed effortless in sustaining intrigue, Mullen credited the 60-odd hours of prep work put into the Thursday, Friday, and Saturday dinners. Moreover, Skinner's constant tweaking keeps the process fresh, she said: "You can't get bored when you play with food for a living."

Indeed, the chances for boredom would seem to be nil. Since opening Eculent in late 2014—the restaurant's name comes from *esculent*, referring to something edible—Skinner guesses that he's served between 400 and 500 different items. "We change menus because we tire of making the same thing," he said, "and we don't want our regular guests to have the same thing twice." Each dinner service lasts about three hours and is downright theatrical: Skinner changes the sound and lights using iPads stashed in nooks and cran-



During the three-hour dinner, chef Skinner prepares surprising treats, such as a Giant Texas Truffle, a chocolate dome that hides treasures.



French onion soup orb



3-D print of coral plate in gold filament



nies around the dining area. Images on tabletops morph from medieval scenes to a lush forest to the Duomo in Florence, Italy, depending on the course being served. You might think all of this would be enough to satisfy Skinner, but he has ambitious plans to launch an updated menu called Moments, which he says will match 2,000 key moments since the discovery of fire with related courses. Executing all those courses will take a few years to complete, he said, and guests at any particular dinner will experience about three dozen of them. "It's not just food on a plate," he said. "It's so much more; it's mind-boggling."

But with Skinner, the mind-boggling seems to be typical. A native of Ponca City, Oklahoma, he opened a magic shop at the age of 13. His grandmother noted his early passion for cooking and guided him to embrace Julia Child's recipes, and, at 16, he opened an honest-to-goodness restaurant on her property. Despite his penchant for theatrics and cooking, his mom pushed him to study economics, statistics, business, and finance, "so that if I ever decided not to cook," he explained, "I would have good degrees to fall back on."

After earning degrees from Oklahoma State University and Oklahoma City University, Skinner combined his science and economics acumen to bring new technology to the energy market before opening his own consulting firm. Traveling the world for clients, he enjoyed learning about far-flung cultures through their cuisines, he said. In Spain, in particular, he became taken with the molecular gastronomy he discovered at restaurants such as Arzak and El Celler de Can Roca. Inspired, he used his scientific sensibilities to develop his own culinary methods. For a while, his avant-garde cooking merely entertained friends, clients, and his own curiosity.

Skinner moved to Houston in 1995 when he launched a consulting firm, and he made the move to Kemah nine years later. He got the idea for Eculent on a long flight to Asia. "I realized that the common denominator in all restaurants was a static environment," he said. "So I decided to create a restaurant with a dynamic environment that could be tailored to the guest experience." In fashioning such a place, he found just the right creative outlet.

"My goal was to create that kind of experience and food in the local market so you don't have to go to Spain or the Netherlands," he said. "Most of what



ECULENT 709 Harris Avenue,
Kemah. (713) 429-4311; eculent.com.

Planning Your Visit

COVID-19 update: At press time, the restaurant had reopened for socially distanced dining.

How to book a reservation: Bookings can be made online at 11 a.m. Central Time on the first day of each month for the following month. They go fast and require a \$25 per-person deposit. Groups of 8 to 12 people should book by phone.

Pricing: Dinner is \$229 per person, plus tax and gratuity. New 40-course Saturday dinners cost \$279, plus tax and gratuity. Wine pairing is \$49; a nonalcoholic pairing is \$39.

Lodging: A few steps behind the restaurant is the owner's B&B property, the Clipper House Inn and Cottages. You'll get a spacious century-old bungalow with charming Victorian furnishings. clipperhouseinn.com.

Also visit: At their winery behind Eculent, the owners offer tours and tastings. Newest on-site is Skinner Family Distillery, making vodka, gin, and rum. clearcreekvineyard.com.

Be sure to designate a driver if you plan to drink alcohol.

we do now is still trial and error, but we know what techniques and ingredients work best together." Though he still teaches a class in decision sciences at Rice University and takes on the occasional consulting project, he considers Eculent his full-time job. "I love the restaurant business," he said, "and I love the fact that there are always opportunities to solve problems."

As I chatted with Skinner, I marveled that Eculent was located in an off-the-radar place like Kemah and not in downtown Houston or even New York City. "Some of the world's best restaurants are in out-of-the-way places, requiring guests to travel for hours to reach them," he said. In Kemah, he enjoys a short commute between the restaurant, his home, and the farm where he grows most of the vegetables he uses in the kitchen. He even seems to enjoy the restaurant's relatively low profile. "We don't work at publicity, which makes our wait list and story even more interesting," he added. "We are such a different concept that I prefer to focus on doing things right and let the recognition come naturally."

Back in the dining room, as my extraordinary dinner continued, Skinner presented a small cut of New York strip that was rosy at its center, having been cooked sous vide for 10 hours, then pan-seared and rested in duck fat. Served with a veal demi-glace, the steak shared space with a fat squiggle of purple mashed potatoes topped with baby carrots, mashed sweet potato, and brussels sprouts swept in an aged

vinegar. A straight-up entrée with no tricks—other than hiding our spoons, forks, and steak knives in a secret drawer inside the bar top—Skinner paired the dish with his Eculent blend made from cabernet sauvignon, cabernet franc, and petite sirah.

The dinner wound down, mostly with sweets, and ended with a Giant Texas Truffle, a large chocolate dome with a crease on top and served on a shallow dish. When Skinner poured hot crème on top, the mound dissolved into a hot chocolate-like pool. Stirring it, we mined hidden treasures like chocolate fudge chunks and caramel spheres. The guy next to me replayed his video of the process, while his wife cooed, "Oooh, that's good food porn." All told, Skinner served 30 courses that night. (As this magazine went to press, he planned to add 10 more courses to his Saturday dinners starting in June.)

After sipping Skinner's port with that big chocolate finish, we began our goodbyes. Marshall and I descended the front steps and walked the 50 yards or so to our bed-and-breakfast cottage on the Eculent grounds. As we strolled, I remembered a mantra attributed to one of my favorite chefs of all time, Jacques Pépin: "Great cooking favors the prepared hands." Certainly, David Skinner's hands are prepared like few others—and they're accompanied by a daring imagination.

June Naylor is a regular contributor to *Texas Journey*.